



God's Word

Calvary Church, United Methodist
Sermon by Rev. John Mueller, Mar 12, 2004

Scripture Reading:
2 Corinthians
5:16-21

¹⁵ From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Sermon:

Earlier this week, I was at a meeting of the District Committee on Ministry for the Metro Boston area. We meet about seven times a year to interview, support, and guide candidates through the process of responding to God's call into the ministry. In these meetings we get to know the candidates, reflect with them on their call, discuss their practice of ministry, and explore their theology. At this past meeting a subject that has been in the news a lot recently came up, that of same-sex marriage. One candidate honestly shared their frustration with the topic and explained they were "just trying to follow God's Word." And then, went on to say "And God's Word says 'no' to those relationships."

There are very sincere United Methodists who agree with this statement, who would agree that God's Word is quiet clear on this subject and that God's word is "no." But there are also many others who don't. Others, who also look to the Bible for God's Word and see it saying "yes." So how *do* we decide what God says and doesn't say in the Bible?

This topic was also one of interest to many who attended our discussion after worship a few weeks ago on the subject of same-sex marriage. More than a handful of people wanted to *really* know what the Bible said on this issue. Which is good! As Christians, the Bible is a primary source of authority for us. Some asked me to put together a list of scripture passages to reflect upon in regards to this issue, so I thought I'd spend a little time this morning sharing with you some *of my* reflections and some of the biblical scholarship on passages in the bible used by Christians who oppose political and social equality for homosexual persons and used in support of equality for homosexual persons.

I know that I'm not the first pastor of Calvary Church to do this. After the conversation a few weeks ago I received a copy of an excellent sermon by Rev. Dr. William Coleman who served here from 1993-1998. Delivered nine years ago, that sermon was also about what the Bible does say and does not say about homosexuality. Do some of you remember it? But many of us obviously weren't here at that time, so hopefully there will be value to looking at the subject again.

I'd also like to invite us to not only consider the issue of same-sex marriage, and by extension homosexuality, but also the deeper issue of when *what is in* the Bible should or shouldn't be authoritative for us. I hope that by giving some illustrations we may come to a better appreciation of an approach necessary to have the Bible speak to us in a way that is faithful; so the Bible can be a rich, powerful and transforming resource for our faith.

To give you an example of how scripture can be misunderstood and how traditional interpretations rather than accurate ones can often influence us, I'd like to lift up the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. This is one story that people refer to as giving God's clear judgment against homosexuality. Indeed it has been equated with homosexuality so much that words like "sodomy" and "sodomites" continue to be used to refer to same-sex acts. The story can be found in Genesis 19 and even though it has been associated with the issue of homosexuality, most serious biblical scholarship today is in agreement that this story is not about homosexuality at all. Rather, the "sin of Sodom" was inhospitality.

You see, the practice of hospitality was a very serious one in the ancient culture reflected in the Bible. Given the nomadic lifestyle of many of the people of the time, it was literally a matter of life and death. People depended on each other's hospitality for survival. That's why giving hospitality to the "stranger," the "foreigner," and the "sojourner" is so important in the Bible. Culturally, visitors had certain claims to the hospitality of others. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is no different. The sin of the men of Sodom was not that they wanted to have "sex" with Lot's male guests but rather the injustice of inhospitality to the stranger.

One way to get a sense of the meaning of a passage of scripture is to also look to see if it is referred to in other places in the Bible, this way, the Bible itself can help us interpret some of the passages within its pages. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is a great example. Jesus refers to it in

the gospel of Luke saying to his disciples, "whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, 'even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off against you; nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.' I tell you, it shall be more tolerable on that day for Sodom than for that town." (Luke 10:1-12) Here Jesus makes reference the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in connection to how well the disciples are "received" as they visit different places - hospitality. The prophet Ezekiel says, "Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy." (Ezekiel 16:49-50) In short, to quote Rev. Dr. Peter Gomes, an American Baptist minister and professor of Christian morals at Harvard University, "to suggest that Sodom and Gomorrah is about homosexual sex is an analysis of about as much worth as suggesting the story of Jonah and the whale is a treatise on fishing."

Some turn to the story of the Adam and Eve to support their opposition to gay marriage - you know - "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." First of all, there are actually two creation accounts and Adam and Eve only appear in one. But both stories are meant to describe *how things have come to be as they are*, rather than *how people ought to act*. Moreover they deal with what is typical of humanity over all, and show no interest in explaining or commenting on possible exceptions. One story explains the differentiation of humanity into two sexes as due to God's concern for procreation and the other explains sexual desire as due to God's concern that human beings enjoy companionship. In one story it is simply *presupposed* that sexual intercourse is for the sole purpose of producing children, in the other it is *presupposed* that everyone experiences desire for physical union of the opposite sex. Possible exceptional cases, like singleness, childlessness, or sexual attraction to a person of one's own sex lie outside the horizons of these stories.

There *are* two specific biblical laws that prohibit same-sex intercourse, they can be found in the book of Leviticus. (18:22, 20:13) But they also appear in the ancient Hebrew purity and holiness codes. (Leviticus 17-26) According to ancient Hebrew conception, something was pure or clean as long as it remained an unblemished specimen of its kind, but it became polluted or unclean when its physical integrity was in some way compromised – like mixing it with another category. That's why we also find in this *same section* laws prohibiting the sowing of two different kinds

of seeds in one field, wearing clothes with two different kinds of fiber, and cross breeding different species of animals. Intercourse between males was viewed as a “mixing of roles” because the biblical writers certainly knew of homosexual acts, but they assumed these acts were being done by heterosexual people. So, in their minds, these people were departing from their “natural” or “given” orientation.

But perhaps more importantly, if we try to lift these couple of passages up as authoritative, what about other prohibitions in the holiness code; like the restrictions on the slaughter of animals, the prohibition against tattoos, the “uncleanness” of semen, and the amount of time a woman is “impure” during a menstrual period? We simply don’t pay much attention to these – as it should be. They’re about ancient ritual practices. They’re not about spiritual or moral faithfulness. Besides, in the New Testament the distinction between those who are “ritually clean” and those who aren’t, are specifically rejected by both Jesus and Paul. (Mk 7:17-23, Romans 14:14, 20)

Speaking of Paul, he’s often brought up when people seek to use scripture to condemn homosexuality. Yet there are only three references attributed to St. Paul that can be quoted in this regard, one of which, in first Timothy, was probably not written even written by him. (Romans 1:26-2:1, I Corinthians 6:9-11, and 1 Timothy 1:10). The reference in Romans is probably the most extensive, but in this reference it’s hard to know what Paul means when he uses the word “natural,” as when he says “for this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another...” For example some moral essayists of Paul’s time describe same-sex intercourse as “unnatural” because of what they supposed was the “natural” superiority of males over females. In the case of two males, both would be demeaned by the passivity of either, in the case of two females, both would be guilty of usurping the role supposed to be reserved for the male.

In addition, for a number of scholars, Paul was concerned with homosexuality because in Greco-Roman culture it represented a secular sensuality that was contrary to his Jewish-Christian spiritual idealism. Paul was against lust and sensuality in any one, including heterosexuals. So, to say homosexuality is “bad” because homosexuals are tempted to do morally doubtful things would also be to say that heterosexuality is “bad”

because heterosexuals are also tempted.

But beyond these arguments, people who would lift up these verses to support their condemnation of homosexuality would also have to be able to defend other statements made by Paul; for example those that encourage slaves to be obedient to their masters and wives subservient to their husbands! (1 Timothy 6:1+2, 1 Corinthians 7:20-24, 1 Corinthians 14:34-36, Ephesians 5:22+23, Colossians 3:18 and others) The Methodist Church existed for 173 years before women were ordained (in 1957) and Paul's words about women being silent in churches and other references suggesting an inferior status for women were lifted up over this time by those who opposed the ordination of women. Were they right to do so? In short, as Victor Paul Furnish, the University Distinguished Professor of New Testament in Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas has said, "the Bible 'says' very little about same-sex practices, and what it presupposes about them can no longer be presupposed. For knowledge about homosexuality itself, we must depend both on the findings of modern research and on the life-experiences of homosexual persons. Apart from such knowledge, nothing the church teaches or does with reference to homosexuality will be credible or relevant."

Of course, it is important for us to remember that Jesus said nothing about the subject at all. He said a lot about other very important subjects, like economic exploitation, violence (loving our enemies), and the hypocrisy of many "religious" people, but nothing about homosexuality. In one place where he comments on Mosaic Law regarding marriage and divorce, Jesus chooses to raise the status of women so that women have rights in the relationship and can't be just cast aside. (Mark 10:2) So, in at least one place where Jesus talks about marriage he was interested in expanding rights to people in his society who didn't have them – not restricting those rights.

There are other things to consider when we reflect on the scriptural witness around this subject. For example there are clear affirmations of deep love between same-sex adults. I'm not suggesting genital relations necessarily, but powerful, and even intimate feelings of love between David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, and even Jesus and the "beloved disciple" of John's gospel. (John 13:23 and others) For example, the bible says that "Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him; for he loved him as he loved his own soul." (1 Samuel 20:17, see also 1

Samuel 20:30) Scripture seems to hold strong emotional bonding between members of the same sex to be cause for celebration, not fear.

As I suggested a few weeks ago, the Bible's consistent emphasis on the need for justice for the alienated, the weak, the marginalized, the overlooked, the misunderstood, the most vulnerable in society is also a scriptural witness that can't be ignored. To put it another way, pain and suffering has authority according to scripture. It gets God's attention – it should get ours as well.

The Apostle Paul says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28+29) It's understandable to ask what other categories Paul would include in this list today? As we consider this issue, what about Paul's words to the church in Corinth that of all the gifts of the Spirit, if we don't love, we're nothing? For "love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (1 Corinthians 13) This is the most consistent message of scripture isn't it? Jesus said everything in the Bible points to the two greatest commandments, love God and love your neighbor as yourself. He also said this is how others will know we are his followers, by the love we have for each other.

Premier biblical scholar Walter Wink has said, "There is no biblical sex ethic. The bible knows only a love ethic, which is constantly brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in any given country, or culture or period." So while there may be no specific rules or commands from scripture about this subject, there are foundations upon which we can build a faithful response. Some of these foundations include the created goodness of our sexuality, the inclusiveness of Christian community, unlimited by purity codes, the equality of women and men, the standard of love, and the service of our sexuality to the reign of God. In my mind, this last statement would mean acts between human beings shaped by love, justice, equality, fidelity, mutual respect, compassion, and grateful joy.

Finally, I would say that it's important to remember that everyone interprets scripture; even those who claim to be literalists. Even, all that I have shared with you today! So the questions we really need to ask

ourselves and others are how do we proceed in our interpretation – do we take the historical, cultural, political, social and literary context of the text into account or not? Another important question is “What are our prior commitments before we read the Bible?” And how do these commitments shape how we proceed from “what it meant then” to “what it means now.” *The plain truth is that what we bring to the Bible will often determine whether or not it has a Word from God for us or not.*

For the same Bible that the advocates of slavery used to protect their wicked self-interests is the Bible that inspired other slaves to revolt and their liberators into action. The same Bible that was used to keep white churches white and blacks in the back of the bus inspired the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and others in the social reformation of the 1960s. The same Bible that was used to support the subjugation of women and to keep them silent in churches has been used to support the establishment and pursuit of equal rights for women. We get in trouble when we're too ready to cite scripture and not study it. And when we forget that our experience and the experience of others are crucial to faithful interpretation.

I'd like to close with a story. This past summer I officiated at a number of weddings. After one of them a person who attended met me in the hallway as I was heading back to hang up my robe. He thanked me for such a nice service and then, after pausing for a moment said, “I'd like to ask you a question.” He went on to ask me about how I felt in regards to the recent news of the Episcopal Church having an openly gay Bishop. I told him I thought it was a long time in coming. He stood back and looked at me in disbelief! After a few moments of silence I ventured out saying “It seems I may have surprised you with my answer.” He responded by saying, “Yes” and stated that he couldn't fathom how anyone would support such a statement. I told him that I know many gay and lesbian clergy that are very capable, gifted, and faithful servants of God. He went on to tell me that I should read the Apostle Paul's letters on the subject. I told him I had. I asked him what Jesus said about the topic and he reluctantly said “nothing.” I asked him what he thought about what Paul said in regards to slavery, and women. And he stumbled over something like “Well that was in a particular time.” So I said to him, “Do you base your entire judgment on this issue on what you think the Bible says?” He responded, “Yes, what else is there?”

It was clear that the conversation wasn't going anywhere – so I simply

asked him to pray for me and I told him I'd pray for him. Afterwards I thought about what I should have said. Is anyone else here the type of person who in the midst of a tense conversation has a hard time thinking about what to say and *afterwards* all these great ideas come to mind? Anyway, I realized in response to his question "What else is there?" I should have said, "A lot!" Experience, reason and tradition to name just a few, but most especially, the Holy Spirit - for ultimately it is the Spirit that makes the Bible the Word of God for us or not. The Spirit by which we live enables us to be ambassadors for Christ! And the Spirit of the living God continues to reveal the truth to us today. May we all continue to test the spirits at work with in us to humbly see if they are from God. And may we continue to seek and live by the guidance of this, God's Holy Spirit. Amen.